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Strategic Warning Staff

Washington, D.C. 20301

S-0022/SWS

21 April 1978

X1 MEMORANDUM FOR

We believe the recommendations in your Working Paper of 7 March address a real and intractable problem which has never been adequately recognized or resolved. However, we feel bound to express certain doubts regarding the assumptions about the nature of warning implicit in your proposals and their feasibility and practical effectiveness. The core of the problem, as we see it, is the perennial question of how to define and delimit the task of providing advance warning at the national level. The answers to these questions logically dictate the organizational structures and procedures to perform the mission.

Your recommendations treat the problem as essentially global, open-ended, and undifferentiated. This interpretation of the problem logically requires a mechanism designed to deal with a formidable range of problems and events on a world-wide scale. Your concepts of an ICWS and working groups or task forces represent plausible mechanisms to perform a mission defined in these terms.

The crux of our reservations is that this definition, however logical in the abstract, is so broad and open-ended that it constitutes not simply an expansion of the warning function but, in fact, the creation of a new and unprecedented mission. This mission, by virtue of its unlimited geographic scope and range of event coverage, would, we believe, transcend the physical and intellectual capacities of mechanisms you envisage. In view of the immense and virtually unlimited range of problems and events this mechanism must deal with, we have serious doubts that the end products would, or could, meet the requirements of effective warning intelligence. In sum, the mission and mechanism you propose would carry the intelligence community into new and uncharted terrain and would result in functions and products which, whatever their limited value in identifying events which have a high potential of major concern to US foreign policy, would fall well short of the rigorous standards of warning intelligence.

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It seems to us that much of the discussion about warning at the national level and the concern expressed about the adequacy of the arrangements created under DCID 1/5 reflect a misunderstanding of and confusion about the intent and expectations of this directive. DCID 1/5 did not envisage the Special Assistant to the DCI for Strategic Warning and the SWS as the sole or exclusive authority for warning. On the contrary, the directive contemplated that warning at the national level would be a shared community responsibility. SWS was conceived as serving essentially a staff and supporting function, and as an adjunct and supplement to the DCI, NFIB and the NIO system in meeting their warning responsibilities. The USIB documents which defined procedures for preparing strategic warning notices made it clear that this was to be a broadly shared function. The guidelines stated that a warning notice "will normally be initiated by the Special Assistant," but they also said warning notices may be proposed to the Special Assistant by a USIB Principal, a National Intelligence Officer, or by "any other senior officer of the intelligence or foreign affairs communities." The Special Assistant, moreover, was authorized to call on any element of the intelligence community for support in preparing a warning notice. SWS was assigned responsibility for coordinating draft warning notices with community agencies and appropriate NIOs. When feasible, the views of appropriate US embassies and field commands are to be solicited.

You will note that the main thrust of our comments on the Working Paper is an appeal that the implications of your proposals be fully explored in the light of past experience and of the unique demands of effective warning. The central lesson of this experience, as we read it, is that the problems and dilemmas of warning are so formidable that this mission should be confined to a limited number of genuinely high priority threats to US security and interests. To cast the warning net too broadly is to risk impairing, if not defeating, this primary function.

We believe the community made a wise and prudent decision in 1975 to define the central task of strategic warning in selective and discriminating terms and to invest responsibility in the NIOs and community production offices for the remaining broad and virtually unlimited potential threats and crises. The total warning problem can be made manageable only through a division of responsibility along these lines.

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If community managers determine that warning on a world-wide scale is not being handled satisfactorily, it seems to us that the most reliable remedy is not necessarily to create new mechanisms but to focus attention on perceived deficiencies in the existing structure, which already provides for procedures under NIO auspices to detect potential tension and warning situations and to organize working groups or task forces to deal with them. Perhaps [] had a sound case when he pointed out that the remedies are "essentially not a matter of organizational structure" but rather of warning "practices" and doctrine.

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Enclosure
Cmts on Working Paper entitled
"Warning and Crisis Operations
in the Intelligence Community,"
by [] 21 Apr 78

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Director

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Comments on the Working Paper entitled "Warning and Crisis Operations in the Intelligence Community," by

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1. The recommendations contained in this paper raise some fundamental questions about the nature and problems of warning intelligence and organizational arrangements for performing this mission. Together they represent a major departure from the conclusions of the studies in 1974-75 which led to the issuance of DCID 1/5. The Strategic Warning Staff understands the concerns that have prompted these recommendations for redefining the warning mission, and we sympathize with their objectives. However, as I and W specialists, we feel an obligation to draw attention to some of the implications we perceive in these proposals in order to identify and clarify certain basic issues.

Mission

2. The most far-reaching changes proposed in the Working Paper concern the scope and definition of mission of the projected Intelligence Community Warning Staff (ICWS). Whereas DCID 1/5 limits the mission of the Special Assistant to the DCI for Strategic Warning, supported by the SWS, to providing "the earliest possible warning" that the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact, the PRC or North Korea "is considering military action by its armed forces beyond its borders, or is employing

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its military capabilities beyond its borders in ways that might threaten military confrontation with the United States," the Working Paper would charge the ICWS with world-wide responsibility across a broad spectrum of non-military as well as military intentions and actions. In contrast to the precision of the warning mission defined by DCID 1/5, the Working Paper prescribes a very general and open-ended mission: to detect "events which have a potential impact on vital national interests" and/or events "which have a high potential of major concern to US foreign policy regardless of the location of the event."

3. It is important to recognize that this definition of the scope and nature of the mission would involve responsibilities and functions that bear little resemblance to the field of strategic warning and threat perception as recognized and practiced over the last three decades. We do not suggest that this fact, in itself, constitutes adequate grounds for opposing the recommendations, but we do urge that the full implications of this sweeping departure be carefully explored. The studies four years ago of the evolution and performance of the Watch Committee are worth consulting again. This experience, in our judgment, would seem to raise serious questions about the feasibility of a global and undifferentiated definition of warning.

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4. DCID 1/5 reflected a considered community judgment that the intrinsic importance and difficulties of strategic warning were such that this mission should be confined to those countries and developments which pose the most serious potential threats to US security and interests. The directive was based on the recognition that an attempt to deal with a virtually unlimited number and range of problems and crises would result in unnecessary and undesirable duplication of effort. More importantly, a global and open-ended mission would carry risks that warning would become so diffused and distracted with areas of secondary importance that its primary functions could be seriously impaired. The decision recorded in DCID 1/5, therefore, was to establish a small interagency staff of specialists who would support the national warning mission by providing a prodding, "second-look," or "devil's advocate" function. The central mission of the SWS is to concentrate on a systematic, across-the-board examination of the target countries' policies, perceptions, intentions, military capabilities, and calculations of risks. This mission was clearly based on the community's recognition that past warning failures were not caused primarily by a dearth of information but rather by an inadequate or incorrect evaluation of available information.

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5. This judgment is shared by most observers who have direct experience and thorough knowledge of the dilemmas of warning. In his analysis of the Israeli failure in October 1973, Gen. Chaim Bar-Lev concluded that "the mistake lay in the evaluation of the intelligence data and not in the absence of accurate and reliable information." 25X1

in his paper prepared for the DCI's meeting last month, noted that "misperception and surprise do not usually result from a lack of relevant information....In every case I have studied, it is easy to see in retrospect that the relevant information for making a correct estimate was available....The key problem in threat perception is clearly the quality of the assumptions that are brought to the information and guide the perceptions of intelligence officers." Roberta Wohlstetter also emphasizes the crucial importance of controlling assumptions, citing "the very human tendency to pay attention to the signals that support current expectations about enemy behavior....Apparently human beings have a stubborn attachment to old beliefs and an equally stubborn resistance to new material that will upset them....Once a predisposition about the opponent's behavior becomes settled, it is very hard to shake."

6. This testimony of experienced authorities is cited to underscore the vital importance of assuring that the critical problems of warning, presented by the behavior, intentions, and calculations of the principal Communist powers,

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are thoroughly and systematically examined by specialists who are aware of the lessons of past failures and who make a self-conscious effort to apply these lessons to contemporary events and problems.

Functions

7. These considerations drawn from past experience would seem to have a direct bearing on the functions prescribed by the Working Paper for the "detection" component of the proposed ICWS. This staff would be confined to identifying events which pose a potential threat to US interests and foreign policy, "stimulating" interagency communications, recommending the formation of working groups or task forces composed of substantive specialists, and supporting these groups. The ICWS would serve primarily as a "catalytic agent" to focus attention on potential warning problems and to bring the "proper talents" together. The purpose of the ICWS "is not so much analytic as it is catalytic and operational." The actual warning assessments would be drafted by ad hoc working groups composed of specialists on the areas or subjects in which the potential threat occurs.

8. It is important to recognize that this prescription for constantly shifting manning of working groups raises the fundamental question of the kind of skills and experience effective warning requires. Is warning intelligence a distinct

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discipline requiring certain qualifications, insights, and experience, or can this function be performed equally well by various working groups which, given the structure of the intelligence community, would be composed in most cases of current intelligence analysts?

9. The lessons of past experience again would seem to provide some guidance. DIA's draft report on "Preliminary System Concept for an Upgraded DOD I&W System" (March 1978) draws a clear distinction between warning and current intelligence responsibilities and skills. The report finds that "A deficiency results when the production of warning and current intelligence is combined within the same resources. Indications, by virtue of their subtlety in earliest appearances, may be recognized early enough to serve as effective warning only if they are exhaustively researched and methodically exploited. Their association with current intelligence creates a situation wherein only the most apparent indications may be recognized. The fullest implications of indications may thus be left unexplored." The DIA draft report notes that post-mortem examinations of intelligence failures in providing strategic warning "illuminate endemic personnel deficiencies in the I&W System." It points out that "although of the highest national priority, I&W has never been formalized as a separate intelligence discipline," and it recommends the

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establishment of minimum personnel qualifications and standards for the I&W System.

X1 10. [] our most experienced and knowledgeable warning analyst, made some observations in her "Handbook of Warning Intelligence" (1972-74) that are worth quoting at some length:

Warning is not current intelligence. The best warning analysis does not flow inevitably or even usually from the most methodical and diligent review of current information. The best warning analysis is the product of a detailed and continuing review in depth of all information going back for weeks and months which may be relevant to the current situation. The latest information, however necessary it may be to examine it, will often not be the most useful or pertinent to the warning assessment....

Only in rare instances where events erupt very suddenly (e.g., the Hungarian revolt in 1956) can indications and warning analysis be considered more or less synonymous with current analysis. In normal times, the current analyst must cope with a large volume of paper. In times of crisis, he may be overwhelmed, not only with lots more paper but with greatly increased demands from his superiors for briefings, analyses, crash estimates and the like. It is no wonder in these circumstances that he can rarely focus his attention on the information which he received last month or find the time to reexamine a host of half-forgotten items which might be useful to his current assessment....In addition, it may be noted that the weeks or days immediately preceding the deliberate or 'surprise' initiation of hostilities may be marked by fewer indications of such action than was the earlier period. Given this circumstance, the strictly current intelligence approach to the problem can be misleading or even dangerous.

11. The concept of revolving working groups presents another potential problem. The members of these groups, in most cases, will already have committed themselves in their respective agency publications or briefings to at least a

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X1 preliminary evaluation of the issue or event at hand. Long experience suggests that able and dedicated analysts, once committed to a line of analysis or set of assumptions, are very reluctant to modify or abandon their views. They understandably feel a professional obligation to defend and promote their published positions. There is also an institutional problem. [] acknowledges the theoretical value of competing views as a safeguard against the hardening of assumptions, but he warns that "one danger is that the desire of separate bureaucracies for what economists call product differentiation encourages dissenting estimates for the wrong reasons." The experience of the Watch Committee in this respect is instructive. Given the realities of group dynamics, it is extremely difficult to avoid resort to hedges and evasions which dilute or obscure judgments in the interest of compromise and unanimity, despite formal encouragement of clear-cut dissents. X1 [] reports that "in ten years of weekly Watch Committee meetings, only six dissents were expressed, even though provision for dissenting views was included in its charter."

X1 12. [] drawing on her long experience with "collective" analysis in the Watch Committee, observes:

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It does not necessarily follow that the more people introduced into the warning process the better the judgment is going to be. Experience has shown that a consensus of all the individuals who have contributed something to the analysis of the problem, together with their supervisors, those responsible for making estimates, and others who may have an interest is not more likely to be correct than the judgments of analysts who have had experience with other warning problems and who are on top of all the information which is available in the current situation. Quite often the effect of bringing more people into the judgment process is to dilute the judgment in the interests of compromise and unanimity. Lamentable as it may be, the fact is that the most nearly correct judgments in crisis situations over a period of years often have been reached by a minority of individuals....What usually happens is that a majority in all agencies is wrong -- or at least not right. Thus the situation is not taken care of by the usual device of a dissenting agency footnote, since it will be a minority in each agency (not a majority in one) which will be in dissent.

13. We have tried to base these comments on the Working Paper recommendations on our assessment of the clues past experience provides for effective warning. There is nothing sacrosanct about the arrangements established by DCID 1/5, and we are acutely aware, as Avi Shlaim observed in his diagnosis of intelligence failures, that "The search for an infallible system of advance warning of an attack is the search for a will-o'-the-wisp." However, when one examines the record of strategic surprise back to Pearl Harbor -- a record replete with recurring errors in the evaluation of available information -- it is hard to challenge judgment 25X that the required remedies "are essentially not a matter of organizational structure" but rather of "practices" and doctrines.

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X1 This judgment, in our view, underscores the wisdom of reinforcing the work of the NIO system and the regular production offices in the community by recognizing that I&W is a separate intelligence discipline and by maintaining the safeguard represented by a small interagency staff of trained and experienced warning specialists. The ideal "solution" of course would be concept of "professional self-indoctrination" in threat perception by all producers of finished intelligence. But given the "real world" of the unavoidable division of labor and specialization in the intelligence community, we believe it is prudent to provide for a supporting "second-look" discipline dedicated to a sustained and systematic (as opposed to an ad hoc) examination of a limited range of the most important warning problems.

14. This is not the place to propose specific revisions in the mission defined by DCID 1/5, but a modest expansion of the charter might be considered, perhaps on an informal basis, to cover certain aspects of situations (e.g., the Middle East and the Horn of Africa) which involve potential confrontations short of direct military confrontation. It is difficult, of course, to establish precise limits beyond those stated in DCID 1/5 without drawing SWS into an imprudent overextension of its primary functions. In the final analysis, the question of scope hinges on priorities and on the community's

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fundamental concepts of the nature and requirements of warning.



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